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ABSTRACT

The British National Curriculum suggests that a range of thinking skills need to be taught. But can children be taught to think? This paper takes the view that all thinking is embedded in a particular context. It gives an account of its author/educators' work with children, draws attention to distinctive features of their approach to teaching, and reports on its impact on children's learning. According to the paper, their approach seeks to foster an environment of greater respect for children's authority as creators of knowledge. It is stated that this is done by emphasizing three major dimensions of teaching for critical and creative thinking: children's moral and human rights to explore and express ideas and beliefs, and adults' obligation to fulfill these rights; creation of an intellectual and emotional space for children's questions and contributions in the classroom; and the need for teachers to become highly skilled in listening to and observing children's dialogue, and in asking questions that enable children to build on each other's ideas. The paper begins with an explanation of why good literature can be so effective in creating space for open-ended inquiry. It then explores aspects of the pedagogy of classroom dialogue. Finally, it offers some sources of evidence about the gains that children make in their learning when this way of working is sustained and developed responsively. Examples drawn from work with younger children are included. (Contains 20 references.) (NKA)

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Opening Up Space for Children's Thinking and Dialogue

By Joanna Haynes and Karin Murris

Paper presented at the United Kingdom Reading Association Conference
(Canterbury, Kent, UK, July 2001)

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OPENING UP SPACE
FOR CHILDREN'S THINKING AND DIALOGUE

Discussion paper for UKRA conference 2001: Just let me think - reflecting on language and learning

Joanna Haynes and Dr Karin Murris

Preamble
Mirroring our approach to teaching thinking, we will not read out our paper, but instead we will offer opportunities for the kind of enquiry and reflection we seek to encourage. The paper gives an account of our work with children, draws attention to distinctive features of our approach to teaching and reports on its impact on children's learning. For the seminar, we will use a picture by Keith Haring and show a Channel 4 video of junior children in an enquiry about the same picture. Our written paper includes examples drawn from work with younger children. We intend to develop this paper further, following discussion about it during the seminar.

Introduction
The National Curriculum suggests that a range of thinking skills need to be taught. But can we **teach** children to think? We certainly have some difficulty with an instrumental view of thinking as a kind of toolkit, made up of distinctive strategies that can be learned and applied or transferred to other settings. We take the view that all thinking is embedded in a particular context. We prefer the idea of **letting children think** (Bonnett, 1995) to the idea of teaching thinking skills.

Classroom contexts are governed, more or less explicitly, by institutional power structures. The schools system and the curriculum are imbued with certain values about the creation and dissemination of knowledge. Critical thinking in the curriculum is framed within a context where teachers not only teach but also control the behaviour of pupils. This in itself does not mean that critical thinking cannot be encouraged. But an environment of greater respect for children's authority as creators of knowledge is needed.

Our approach seeks to foster such an environment. We do this by emphasising three major dimensions of teaching for critical and creative thinking. These are:

- children's moral and human rights (UN Convention of the Rights of the Child) to explore and express ideas and beliefs, and adults' obligation to fulfil these rights;
- the creation of an intellectual and emotional space for children's questions and contributions in the classroom;
- the need for teachers to become highly skilled in listening to and observing children's dialogue, and in asking questions that enable children to build on each other's ideas.

Over the last three years, many teachers have adopted and adapted our approach (Murris 1992, Murris & Haynes 2000) as part and parcel of a wider perspective on the teaching of literacy. Many dedicate one literacy hour a week to open-ended dialogue triggered by children's questions in response to a text, picture or moving image. There is clear evidence that using philosophical enquiry as a teaching strategy increases children's confidence in their ability and power as meaning makers. Its emphasis on oral work increases levels of participation across the reading ability range, from struggling readers to the very able.

This paper begins with an explanation of why good literature can be so effective in creating space for open-ended enquiry. We then explore aspects of the pedagogy of classroom dialogue. Finally we offer some sources of evidence about the gains that children make in their learning when this way of working is sustained and developed responsively.

Thinking with pictures and picture books

There are practical, *educational* reasons why pictures and picture books are so suited to teaching thinking. Pictorial material offers easier access to ideas for a greater number of children - ideal for young readers, or children with reading problems. Picture books can be funny and imaginative; and they are short, entire stories (ideal for one-hour discussions). A good selection can represent a wide variety of aesthetic styles, and different cultures, giving children a rich and varied source of ideas to think and feel with. The aesthetic quality of the book enhances the power with which ideas are 'transmitted' – the better a book is illustrated, the more thoughts, feelings, and images the reader can work with.

But there are also deeper, *philosophical* reasons why literature works so well. It can be life-like, but, at the same time, different enough to highlight certain aspects of 'reality'. This difference, according to Anne Wilson, is part of the point: the familiar is made to seem strange, so that we look at it again in a different light (Wilson, 1983, p. 21). Much of the power of picture books lies in what they leave out. For example, omitting many details of a 'real' family in David McKee's *Not Now, Bernard*, makes Bernard's family seem strange. But leaving out much of 'the real', serves to highlight one particular aspect of it – parental neglect – making this particular aspect all the more powerful and ripe to explore.

Good stories work like Kafka's axe – they 'smash the frozen sea within us' (Kafka quoted in Chambers, 1985, p. 17). So many modern picture books, in Doonan's words, "set our hearts knocking and always set our brains ticking" (Doonan, 1993, p. 12). When emotionally engaged, our reasoning is at its most powerful and creative. The subject of our thoughts needs to matter to us, for us to make the effort to be critical.

Through enquiry, children can play with the wealth of ideas contained in those pictorial other-possible-worlds. And, as Doonan points out, the "more skilful we are, and the more ideas the picture book contains, the more the ideas go on bouncing. And in the process we create something of our very own" (Doonan, 1993, p. 21).

Although illustrations are seen by many educationalists as crucial to developing children's reading abilities, books for literate children contain fewer, or none of them – a situation which does not have the support of Judith Graham (Graham, 1990, pp. 8, 9; Moss, 1988, p. 4). She argues that the act of reading is not "...a mechanical unpicking of the written code and relies much more on what's in our heads already in terms of knowledge about language and life" (Graham, 1990, p. 13). The ability to "picture it in your mind" is essential for making sense of the written word. Many people, including Lipman, believe children should do this themselves, and illustrations obstruct this process. Bruno Bettelheim, for example, says:

> *"Illustrated storybooks ... do not serve the child's best needs. The illustrations are distracting rather than helpful. Studies of illustrated primers demonstrated the pictures diverge from the learning process rather than foster it because the illustrations direct the child's imagination away from how he, on his own, would experience the story. The illustrated story is robbed of much content of personal meaning which it could bring to the child who applied only his own visual association to the story, instead of those of the illustrator" (Bettelheim quoted in Graham, 1990, p. 17).*

It seems to follow from this that picture books - books in which text and pictures are *interdependent* - are a poor second choice, because children will be prevented from creating their own images, and, as such, from creating their own meanings. Graham admits that with *some* picture books that could be the case, but cautions not to generalise. She gives examples of exceptions such as Sendak's *Where the Wild Things Are*, where text and illustrations are so interdependent that it would be like "...giving a performance of a concerto without an orchestra" (Graham, 1990 p. 17).
Readers are not empty of images when they open a picture book any more than they are empty of ideas when they open a text. Graham points out that, like words, pictures have meaning "because readers bring meaning to them...children filter art as they do all life experiences through their own perspectives" (Graham, 1990, p. 18).

Jane Doonan, who deals explicitly with the aesthetic quality of the illustrations in picture books, explores the idea of how pictorial art, as she calls it, "communicates" (Doonan, 1993). She points to the expressive powers of pictures which enables the book to function as an art object: "Something which gives form to ideas and to which we can attach our ideas" (Doonan, 1993, p. 7). Doonan argues that:

> *"By playing with the ideas provoked by a work of art, we create something of our own from it. And in that play we have had to deal with abstract concepts logically, intuitively and imaginatively" (Doonan, 1993, p. 7).*

She emphasises the impossibility of contemplating pictures *passively*, and compares it to reading a poem by gazing at the printed page without reading it. Making sense of pictures requires an attitude that is "...dynamic, restless, searching, testing, less attitude than action:

creation and recreation" (Doonan, 1993, p. 77). And Graham argues that the addition of the illustrations gives access "...to deeper levels of meaning making" (Graham, 1990, p. 21).

We conclude that pictures and picture books are excellent stimuli for enquiry in the way in which they powerfully invite the reader and viewer emotionally and cognitively to respond. Literature provides an aesthetically rich context for the teaching of thinking.

When teaching children to think for themselves the role of the teacher is to assist children to take the enquiry wherever it may lead, while resisting the temptation to unnecessarily return to the text, or to turn to the ideas, themes, or morals, that the adults find important. The enquiry's direction or purpose is to answer the questions the children themselves have raised from a text or picture. Using picture books in this way differs significantly from a conventional, more didactic, use in the classroom. Judith Graham warns, for example, that it is not the role of the teacher to do the children's 'gap-filling' for them. Teachers should not *tell* children what the story is about (Graham, 1990, pp. 114-115). Meanings will grow if, and only if, we give children plenty of time. "All the taped and videoed evidence is that teachers intervene too much and do not allow literature to do its own work" (Graham, 1990, p. 115).

Communities of Philosophical Enquiry: a distinctive methodology

Our work is located in the field and practice of philosophy with children. The main activity of the 'community of philosophical enquiry' (Cam 1995, Lipman 1991,1993) is whole-class discussion where the classroom organisation may vary from week to week. A topic may be carried forward for several sittings, often enhanced by the interludes that provide time for digestion of ideas. Participants sit together in a way that enables each of them to hear and see all the others. Ground rules for working together are agreed and can be modified as the group develops. Rules include all the obvious pre-requisites for ordered and fair deliberation: listen carefully, avoid interrupting or dominating, respect one another and don't ridicule. Silence is accepted, although the reticent are gently encouraged to participate.

In the early stages the teacher usually provides a starting point for questions. Teachers can read aloud a text, such as a story, poem or newspaper report. These must be selected carefully for their power to express ambiguity, to produce puzzlement, or to evoke a deep response. The illustrations in books are just as important as the text in prompting questions and establishing reference points for discussion.

Once the material has been introduced and made accessible to all the pupils, they then need time to think. This may be spent in silence, or in talking to a neighbour. Depending on age and mood, children can draw or write notes as a response to the stimulus. Children consider their own responses and are encouraged to formulate questions. It is the examination and pursuit of the children's questions that form the substantial part of each enquiry. The teacher does not offer questions unless invited to do so by the children.

A range of activities, such as drawing, writing, painting and drama, can provide a vital part of the philosophical enterprise. Movement and change in the focus of the children's attention is a natural habit. Classroom philosophy is a practical activity as well as a

cerebral one. Its practice is collaborative and collective as well as individual. Individual children, like adults, have strengths in different areas, such as logical reasoning, imaginative ideas, the ability to see the whole, awareness of others, the expression of empathy, the ability to spot patterns and connections, and the ability to see flaws in a line of argument. Successful engagement depends on the freedom of interaction of such divergent and complementary strengths within a group.

Attention needs to be paid, not only to how we reason and listen, but also to *how* and *what* we question in classrooms. In collaborative enquiry, teachers model skills and attitudes that can be modified and internalised by the children. Teachers also make crucial decisions about resources and how to use them. This often means that the precise content of a lesson is not known in advance, but is determined by the children's questions. This has implications for planning and preparation as well as for the styles of teaching. Teachers have to be willing to treat pupils' questions without prejudice, to genuinely commit themselves to the enquiry, while resisting the desire to drive the discussion in a pre-planned direction. The teacher's presence, attention and responsiveness during the enquiry are of utmost importance to support the children's experience of thinking (Haynes & Murris, 2000). Such enquiry is more than just discussion. It differs in the way in which concepts are explored, shaped and reshaped.

What are children capable of?

We can often be taken aback by the profound or logical or poetic nature of children's observations about matters such as life, death, morality and the universe. They often exceed our expectations. But why are we so astonished by their perceptiveness? Does this reflect our tendency to underestimate children's capacity for knowing and perspective? (Clark & Moss, 2001).

Age is not necessarily the most significant factor when it comes to seeking meaning. In one sense it is not how much experience we have but what we do with it that counts. In preparing teaching for any group, teachers need to be aware of the culture of learning to which the participants are accustomed, but they also need to challenge received wisdom about children's capacities such as sitting still, questioning, abstract or metaphorical thinking, moral decision making, making sense of experience, etc.

In listening carefully and attentively, in questioning each other and themselves, in trying to find answers, and in weighing up alternatives, children deepen their understanding. They practise thinking for themselves in a rigorous manner. We do not so much go 'round and round in circles' but 'spiral together' inwards and outwards. For example, we might use concepts such as *friendship*, *choice*, *passion*, or *desire* to help clarify and deepen our thinking about *love*. In principle this process could go on indefinitely.

Creating space for thinking

Our teaching methods are in keeping with what has sometimes been referred to as 'transformative pedagogy'. In a Community of Philosophical Enquiry, children are encouraged to bring examples from their own personal experience. A shift in power can occur as the emphasis moves away from transmission of public knowledge towards the

problematisation of knowledge itself. All claims to knowledge are considered, key concepts are explored and assumptions are challenged. The community makes a sustained effort to be democratic in its processes (Splitter & Sharp 1995).

Seen thus, education is part of the continuous reconstruction of knowledge and of society, and transformation is achieved partly through the acquisition of a critical language to analyse ideas, beliefs and theories. This process has political and moral dimensions. Widening and deepening access to literacy has often been associated with political emancipation, empowerment and social reconstruction. We do not underestimate the difficulties of achieving this in practice. We are also interested in the ways in which being part of a literate society forges, expands **and** limits our thinking (Egan, 1988)

Our first suggestion is to put effort into opening up the space for children's thinking. This means inviting pupils to be curious, to puzzle, to be surprised and to formulate questions that will provide the basis for discussion. It also implies allocating and protecting the necessary regular slot in the timetable. Most importantly, it requires the teacher to let go of any content-based objectives and to learn how to follow the children's thinking.

Children's questions emerge from their active reflection upon their own experiences. Children and teachers have to think for themselves. A remark from a London-based teacher after observing an enquiry illustrates this point really well. Her Year 1 pupils had been struggling with the fact that different clocks can show different times. So they were encouraged to explore the question 'what is (real) time?' – a question that she herself experienced as a "block in front of her". She didn't know where to go with the question. It produced in her what some Greek philosophers called *aporeia* to describe the experience of when thinking itself 'gets stuck' – not because the one who is doing the thinking is inadequate, but because of the difficulty of the subject matter itself. With philosophical questions such as 'what is time?' there are no set ways of answering the question and teachers are often just as perplexed as the children. Contemplating profound questions that have no firm answers generates deep thinking in the classroom in which everyone can learn from each other.

The teacher's skilful role in this kind of open-ended discussion calls for faith in the pupils. The teacher, as a **guide**, needs to identify ways of deepening or extending the enquiry, without being directive. She encourages children to clarify their ideas, to explain and give reasons, to think of examples and counter examples, to make connections. She may help by mapping ideas on paper as they emerge. The discussion will often go in unexpected directions and the teacher has to jettison any of her own thoughts about what might emerge from an enquiry. The teacher watches for the levels of engagement with a particular question or hypothesis.

As a **guardian**, the teacher monitors the social and emotional dimensions of the enquiry. She is watching for involvement. She is making it safe for children to challenge, to disagree or to change their minds. To be a **co-enquirer** the teacher needs to demonstrate a genuinely questioning attitude. Part of this is to do with recognising what perplexes the children and being willing to reconsider her opinions and beliefs.

It is often this role as **co-enquirer** that creates the greatest difficulty **and** the greatest opportunities. There are many constraints on teachers' ability to listen to children in the classroom. There are the obvious constraints related to the number of children and the pressures of time. There is the accountability to colleagues, to parents, to employers and to the government. Above all, being able to identify or empathise with what is puzzling for young children means we often have to question fundamental assumptions we are making about their capacity to instruct or enlighten us, or to show us another viewpoint. We are inclined either to romanticise about young children's perceptions, to dismiss them as naïve, or to be pre-occupied with ensuring that they focus on knowledge in the public domain.

An episode from Joanna's work with one class of children:
Anna, Damien, a student and the question of the teddy bear moving
A discussion starts, arising from a story, among the children in a class of infants aged 4-7. They had watched a video about the adventures of a teddy bear. Several children express puzzlement that a toy bear is shown walking, climbing and moving its head. They say it is strange because teddy bears do not normally move. Four or five others then agree. Bears do not normally walk. For a few minutes it seems that there is unanimity. They have dismissed the possibility of a toy moving. At some point, one girl takes another tack. She says, 'I disagree with Lauren because teddy bears, when you go out of your room, they can move.' Damien retorts, 'no they can't'. I (the teacher) shush him and repeat Anna's point, encouraging her to elaborate. Damien interjects again 'it's not real…' I say 'we don't know do we?' A minute or so later Anna adds 'I think it's quite puzzling because they don't move when you're in the room.' The reason for this, according to Anna, is, 'because they don't want you to know that they can move.'

Anna's point seems to encourage other children to report on other examples of toys being left in one place and turning up in another. There is a lively period of conversation in which children alternate between relating incidences of their toys moving, explanations for these occurrences and counter explanations. Another child seeks to refute Anna's claim with the comment 'that's only a video, it's not real'. Natasha replies that ' you don't know if teddies move or not'. The main explanation for the moving bears is that mums and dads do it. The children consider this suggestion in the light of various examples. In response to the teacher asking why some children think the bears move it turns into an investigation into the possible motives of bears for moving around. Reasons include that they are bored, angry or seeking attention. During the discussion Lauren, who raised the initial question about the toy bear moving, informs the group that she is going to watch her own teddy bear more carefully from now on.

Joanna's commentary:
'During the discussion, I was happy to let the children pursue their ideas and was pleased at the levels of participation and listening. Initially I viewed the children's claims regarding the bears moving as naïve. When listening again to their dialogue as I transcribed it, the logic of the children's thinking about not finding things where they left them became evident to me. I thought about the frequency of adults tidying children's things away, organising and moving them, even in space that is nominated as belonging

to the children. I was struck by the realisation that the children were speaking of the world as it appears to them and that their arguments were founded on this experience. It was a turning point that alerted me to the need to recognise their authority in making claims to knowledge based on their experience.

In relating this episode to student teachers, one student strongly challenged me about the wisdom of pursuing Anna's point. She appeared quite horrified at my encouragement of Anna. She said she was a scientist. She could not contemplate a situation in which she would not want to ensure that children learned the truth of things. She said that children have to be told what is real. This, in itself, is a huge philosophical problem to consider.

We continue to be very pre-occupied with problems of listening to children in the classroom. We notice that younger children often adopt an experimental stance with ideas, trying thoughts out and changing their minds without worrying and without strong attachment to particular beliefs. They are taken up in the moment by the novelty of what they say. What can we as adults learn from this playfulness and apparent flexibility of mind?

Evidence of success

How should we set about judging the success of any attempt to 'let children think'? What sort of gains are we looking for and how might these be measured? We have argued that children's right to explore and express views is an important reason for promoting critical and creative thinking in the classroom. We want to suggest that in appraising any teaching that aims to develop thinking we must look to levels of participation, to inclusion of all pupils, to greater confidence in questioning and speaking, as much as we must look to any gains that are measured by formal academic tests.

There have been no large-scale longitudinal studies of the impact of philosophy with children in the UK. The evidence we have is drawn is largely from our own observations and those of the children with whom we work. Added to this is evidence from small-scale studies, including the Welsh Dyfed Report (Dyfed LEA, 1994) and Ofsted inspection reports of schools. These include Tuckswood Community First School, Horning First School, Colby Primary School in Norfolk (Norfolk Education Advisory Service, 2001), whose staff have adopted the approach described in this paper.

One of the strongest points to emerge in reviews carried out with children is the emphasis they put on having an opportunity to speak, to have their point of view taken seriously and to have their experiences counted. Many children value the chance to speak without the pressure to record on paper. Children stress the advantages of talking together in a number of ways. They describe the sense of feeling cared for, and not being alone, when others listen to them. They speak of the pleasure of hearing a variety of opinions, pursuing ideas, constructing argument and seeking truth. One child says that what he likes is 'having all the different arguments, finding out whether things are true or not, and discussing them all together'. Another child reports, 'everyone has got a different opinion and we are all arguing 'cos each one has a different opinion to each question'.

In one school where children have practised philosophical enquiry over several years teachers report a variety of changes that they have observed in their pupils. The teacher of the class of four to seven-year-olds noticed a greater diversity of ideas in discussion as well as children's increased ability to build on each other's ideas. Whenever the children listened to a story they asked many more questions and they showed greater interest in the motives of characters in stories. When looking at books by themselves the teacher noticed more evidence of interaction with pictures and with text. She also noticed that the children were using the language introduced in enquiry sessions at other times in class.

In the same school, the teacher responsible for the class of junior pupils, aged 7 to 11, was particularly aware of changes in children's levels of social skills. She reported increased levels of co-operation between all pupils in the class, more effective collaboration in group work and enhanced ability to negotiate with one another. Pupils appeared more confident and more ready and able to articulate their ideas and express their feelings and opinions (Haynes, 2001).

These gains claimed by children and teachers seem to endorse the view expressed by Carol McGuiness in her research paper on thinking skills (McGuiness 1999). She suggests: "developing better thinking and reasoning skills may have as much to do with creating dispositions for good thinking as it has to do with acquiring specific skills and strategies. For this reason classrooms need to have open-minded attitudes about the nature of knowledge and to create an educational atmosphere where talking about thinking - questioning, predicting, contradicting, doubting - is not only tolerated but actively pursued."

A study by Dyfed Local Education Authority shows significant benefits for pupils reading, thinking and self-esteem. This study, carried out with Year 1 pupils, involved 18 primary schools. *The Improving Reading Standards in Primary Schools Project* (Dyfed LEA, 1994) evaluated two teaching approaches: a programme based on the philosophy with picture books approach developed by Karin Murris (1992) and a 'reading activity' designed to enhance the transfer of thinking skills to reading.

In terms of reading, pupils who had done philosophy made more gains in reading than those who had not, although these gains did not reach a statistically significant level. (Given the age of the pupils and the length of the project this is not surprising; according to one of the project leaders the reading of most children improved significantly – in comparison to the control group – for years after the research project had officially come to an end.) Many pupils reported that they were more able to think of ideas, and that this activity helped them with their reading and writing. Teachers attributed a greater interest in books and improved reading skills to the enquiry based approach.

In terms of thinking and reasoning the children had more ideas as a result of the intervention, not only in philosophy sessions but also in other areas of the curriculum. One teacher reported feedback from parents indicating that their children were thinking and questioning more at home. Confronted with a problem situation they were better

'able to grasp more than the immediate consequences of the problem and could see issues relating to more than one side of the problem.' (Dyfed LEA, 1994).

This study is not alone in identifying one of the most important gains as an increase in pupils' self esteem as a result of being involved in discussion where their ideas are given credence. The report states:

> *'The children's enthusiasm for the process, their increasing participation and the increase in quality and quantity of ideas were all evidence of the children's growth in their belief in themselves as thinkers. The children's growth in self-esteem was most obvious in those who at the outset were either withdrawn or unfocused in their participation, but who by the end were joining in with confidence and making relevant contributions respectively.'* (Dyfed 1994)

The Dyfed LEA Report on this project also provides five brief case studies of children with special educational needs who in particular benefited from the thinking skills work based on the approach developed by Murris (1992), using picture books as a starting point for enquiry. The 'flourishing' of this group of children is often reported by teachers adopting the approach, in the sense that children change from sometimes tearful, restless or very passive and withdrawn ('invisible') to becoming more cheerful, outgoing, active participants being able to concentrate better on tasks in hand.

These findings concur with the comments made by Carol McGuiness (1999) on the benefits of philosophy with children. In her summary on the different thinking skills approaches she writes:

> *The approach can be used across the curriculum particularly in the context of social and moral education where the philosophical emphasis is on questioning and questioning is important. Evaluations show positive effects along many dimensions other than standardised achievement tests, for example, in terms of the quality of children's discussion and argumentative skills, ability to formulate questions, self-esteem, and so on.*

Conclusion

We have argued that teaching thinking is necessarily connected with issues of authority, children's rights and our beliefs about knowledge. Instead of focusing on teaching certain skills, our approach focuses on optimising the conditions under which children's thinking can flourish. This includes the distinctive methodology of a community of enquiry which puts special demands on the teacher as guide, guardian and co-enquirer and assumes high expectations of children as thinkers and knowledge creators. Literature plays a unique role in philosophical enquiry in the way in which it invites critical and creative responses from viewer or reader. Small-scale research and inspection reports have shown promising results, but longitidunal studies are urgently needed.

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